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Editor's Notebook

This issue of *Rural Development Perspectives* is a special one on the Great Plains. That area has long been considered a unique one with its own set of rural problems. Historically, these problems have centered around agriculture, and the region still depends on farming more than any other. As the postwar revolution in agricultural technology reduced the number of people needed on the farm, population has fallen in many counties and there has been a search for new economic opportunities and strategies. This issue looks at the Great Plains, its problems, and recent developments in the region's economy and in agricultural and rural policy that will affect its future. Thomas D. Rowley begins the issue with an overview of the Great Plains and the difficulties of fashioning development policies for an area that lacks many of the ingredients that have enabled many rural communities to make successful transitions from agricultural to more diversified economies.

As a naturally dry area of predominantly grasslands, the Great Plains was long thought of as the "Great American Desert," suitable at best for grazing cattle. When railroads made the Plains more accessible after the Civil War, farmers began arriving to cultivate the soil. Despite periodic droughts, the worst of which was the Dust Bowl of the 1930's, farmers learned to adapt agriculture to the dry conditions. David H. Harrington and Robert Dubman discuss recent developments in Plains agriculture and the effects of the 1996 farm legislation on agriculture and related industries. That law, which removes production controls and price supports, will probably cause farmers to plant more, increasing the demand for inputs and services. Whether or not this boosts farm income will depend largely on how much the new WTO and NAFTA treaties will increase demand for the region's grain, cattle, and cotton.

Richard Rathge and Paula Highman trace the long-term decline of population in the Great Plains. Counties with large cities have gained, but most rural areas have suffered decline, especially among young adults. John B. Cromartie's article discusses why the population losses of the 1980's have turned around for most counties in the mid-1990's. The most rural areas continue to lose population, but recent migration is associated less with rural to urban movement than with movement to high-amenity and good commuting areas.

Loss of population has affected industries well beyond agriculture. David A. McGranahan's article on manufacturing, based on a survey of manufacturers, confirms that, while labor is well-trained, an adequate supply is often hard to find where population has declined. Moreover, such areas are often perceived as unattractive to managers. Meat packing has accounted for much of the expansion of manufacturing in the Plains.

Retail/wholesale trade employment has also been greatly affected by declining population, according to the article by Donald J. Adamchak and others. Much of this effect was delayed until the 1980's, as many business owners held on until retirement or until competition from large chain stores became too intense.

Rick Reeder, Faqir Bagi, and Samuel Calhoun discuss Federal programs for the Great Plains and what proposed changes in defense, welfare, and other areas might mean for the region. Overall, the residents of the Plains receive more Federal funds per capita than the rest of the country, especially from agricultural, defense, and community and natural resource programs. Persistent poverty counties, and those where the predominant economic activity comes from agriculture or government, benefit the most.

Finally, Linda M. Ghelfi explains the importance of nonemployers in the Plains, especially for personal and business services and miscellaneous retailing. Many retail and service businesses are run solely by one person.

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